

The Three Edwards

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Robert the Bruce

I

The family of the Bruces, second choice in that arbitration for a crown, had never been reconciled to the selection of John de Baliol as King of Scotland. The grandfather had died in 1295 and had been followed by his son, the Earl of Carrick, in 1304, leaving the grandson, who is known in history as Robert the Bruce, to continue the family pretensions.

The Earl of Carrick had been a romantic figure. He contracted a marriage with the widowed Countess of Carrick when she was a royal ward, without the king's consent. The story ran that he was hunting on her estates and she saw him there for the first time, falling in love with him so completely and violently that she instructed her men to abduct him. They were man and wife when they appeared again in the public eye. Though some skeptics declared this was all a ruse to cover up the fact that Bruce had married her with no regard to the royal wardship, it seems to have been a love match. At any rate, they brought into the world five sons, four of whom were destined to die violently in the struggle for Scottish freedom, and five daughters, all of whom married husbands of high lineage.

The Earl of Carrick was so little reconciled to the decision in favor of Baliol that he made an excuse to go to Norway when Baliol summoned his first Parliament. After that ineffective monarch ran foul of Edward's power and was sent into exile, Carrick demanded the reversion of the crown. But Edward had other plans. He was reported to have responded in verse:

Have I nought ellys to do nowe
But wyn a kynryck to gyve yhowe?

After that the second Bruce seems to have receded into a purely-minor part and died quietly, and unhappily, on his English estates.

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The grandson in the meantime had been turning his coat with a regularity that made his career a difficult one to follow. At one stage he would be superintending the English efforts to breach the stout walls of Stirling Castle with the machines King Edward had brought up from England, called by such expressive names as the *Tout-de-Monde*, the *Parson*, and the *Lup-de-Guerre*. At another he would be sharing the guardianship of Scotland with Comyn the Red in open defiance of the English king. He was forgiven several times and taken back into the king's peace. Edward, in fact, showed a degree of patience with him that is hard to reconcile with his harsh treatment of others.

Then things began to clarify for the sole guardian of the Bruce holdings and claims. Wallace, who had stood by Baliol, had been executed. Baliol himself was falling into blindness in exile at Castle Gaillard in Normandy and had lost interest in Scottish affairs. Comyn the Red, who now took on himself the Baliol claims because of a distant relationship, was a ruffler and a hothead. Robert the Bruce, no longer content to play small parts in the sanguinary drama, stalked to center stage and assumed the leading role.

Robert the Bruce had not intended to declare himself as early as this. It was known that Edward had only a short time to live, and Bruce was wise enough to realize it would be the better part of valor to wait for the death of that stout warrior before unfurling the Scottish royal flag. But an incident forced his hand.

On the tenth day of February, 1306, he went to Dumfries and there met John Comyn the Red in the Franciscan monastery. Dumfries stood on the north bank of the Nith and, despite the fact that it was a peaceful and prosperous town of wide and friendly streets, it had become the scene of much fighting and bitterness between the adherents of Scotland's many monarchical parties. The town had been originally of Baliol sympathies because the Princess Devoargilla, mother of John de Baliol, had built its stone bridge of nine tall spans. Why Bruce and Comyn met there has never been satisfactorily explained, although it is believed they came by appointment to discuss the situation. There was no love lost between them certainly. At an earlier meeting in Selkirk Forest, the Red had leaped upon the younger Bruce and threatened to kill him. The same trace of black blood showed itself at once, although

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this time it was Bruce who attacked the other. It was in front of the high altar that this occurred, and Bruce's passion ran so high that his dagger struck deep into the Comyn's side. And so the man who had thought himself entitled to command at the battle of Falkirk and had left Wallace to face the attack while he rode off ingloriously with the Scottish cavalry, fell to the stone floor.

There is a legend that Bruce came out of the monastery very pale of face and agitated of spirit to join his friends who had waited outside.

"I sank my dagger in the Comyn's side," he said. "I think he is dead."

"Then I shall go back and make sure," declared one of his men, drawing his own dirk, which was one of the long and heavy variety used by the men of the Highlands.

Comyn was still alive, and so the follower of Bruce stabbed him again and thus made certain of his death.

The same legend has it that, before going to meet Comyn the Red, Bruce had received from a friend in England twelve pennies and a pair of spurs as a warning of treachery. It is a good story, and although it smacks of minstrelsy and invention, it is worth the telling.

The die was cast. There would be no forgiveness after this, even if Bruce had sought it; and at last he saw the light and was prepared to fight now in spite of everything. He proceeded to act with creditable dispatch. He went to Scone, where he was met by that brave churchman, Bishop Wishart of Glasgow, and given absolution and the coronation robes. It was an illustrious company which assembled there to declare their support to the new leader. In addition to Wishart there were the bishops of St. Andrews and Moray; the earls of Lennox, Atholl, and Errol; young Sir James Douglas, a nephew of the king; a considerable smattering of the gentry bearing such names as Barclay, Fraser, Boyd, and Fleming; the four brothers of Bruce—Edward, Nigel, Thomas, and Alexander—and last but certainly not least Isabella, Countess of Buchan.

It was, in fact, an imposing representation of the nobility of Scotland. What a different reading it might have given to history if all these blue-blooded Scots had assembled on the hilltop near Falkirk and ranged themselves behind the leader with the heavy claymore, William Wallace!

The right spirit certainly was displayed by the Countess

Buchan. She was a daughter of Duncan, Earl of Fife, but her husband was a Comyn (popularly called Patrick-with-the-Beard) and on that account a bitter enemy of the Bruce. She stole away from home, ordering the fastest horse in the stables to be saddled for her use. Arriving at Scone before the ceremony, she announced that, as her brother, the present Earl of Fife, was away, she had come to place the crown on the head of the new king in his stead. This honor was conceded to her.

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Edward had been so certain that the conquest of Scotland was complete that he had set himself to the task of establishing administrative machinery for that country after the order of things in England. For the purpose he had summoned to Carlisle a small group of barons and bishops, English as well as Scottish. The outcome was a division of the northern country into judicial districts over which justices and sheriffs were appointed. Edward signed the necessary papers and threw down his pen, convinced that he had completed his task.

Almost immediately, however, the word reached him that new fires of rebellion were blazing on the hillsides in the north and that Robert Bruce had been crowned at Scone. He swore a mighty oath that this time there would be no compromise. Aymer de Valence, a relation of Edward's in descent from the second marriage of the beautiful widow of King John, was his lieutenant in Scotland. Orders were sent him that all who had taken up arms must be killed or made prisoners and executed. In the meantime an army was assembled in England and was started north under the nominal command of Prince Edward. To prepare him for his responsibilities, the young prince was knighted at Westminster. In turn, then, the prince knighted two hundred and seventy young gentlemen who were to have their baptism of fire with him.

Conferring knighthood had developed into a complicated and rather beautiful ceremony since the beginning when the accolade, a tap on the shoulder with a sword, had sufficed. It began the previous evening when the candidate was shaved and then taken to a special chamber where a bath was prepared with scented water and a covering of linen and rich cloths. While he bathed, two old knights talked to him solemnly about the duties of the order. Later still he was led to

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the chapel, where he stood throughout the night, keeping watch over his armor and saying prayers and meditating. At break of day he bathed again, confessed, heard mass, and offered a taper with a piece of money stuck in the white tallow. With his future squire riding before him and carrying the sword and the gold spurs which were to be attached to his heels, he made his way to the great hall. Here he knelt on one knee and was given the accolade. The knight who performed the ceremony would say a few words, not the usually accepted phrase, "I dub thee knight" (this came in later, when the ceremony had been much simplified), but some felicitous message such as, "Be thou a brave and gentle knight, faithful to thy God, thy liege lord, and thy lady fair." Finally there would be feasting and drinking and telling of stories and listening to the minstrels. At one time the candidate was supposed to confer his spurs on the cook of the establishment as a fee, but this was never general, nor did it survive long, for gold spurs were not easily come by and a cook, after all, was only a cook.

In order that all this shaving and scrubbing and standing vigil could be carried on with two hundred and seventy candidates at one time, very special arrangements had been made. Some of the trees in the Temple Gardens were cut down to make room for the tents of this great mob of embryonic knights and their squires and servants. Some stood watch over their armor in Temple Church, but most of them performed this essential part of the ritual at Westminster Abbey. The next day the young men, their faces glowing from the unusual attention of two baths in a few hours, their eyes shining with the proper exultation, were led up one by one for the official tap on the shoulder. The crush was so great in the abbey that two men were suffocated in front of the high altar. There could not have been any room left in the great church for the sanctuary seekers who infested it ordinarily, lurking in the shadows, begging furtively for food, and under no circumstances venturing outside. Perhaps they had been herded together and shut up in the crypt until the ceremony was over.

It seems certain that the king, who could more accurately be called longheaded than long-legged, had planned this brilliant ceremony for a double purpose: to present his tall son to the people of England in the most favorable light, and to impress on the idle mind of that young man a fitting sense of the important part he would soon be called upon to play.

p. 119-20: Dumfries / Bruce / Fleming

See PN - p. 1087
Jeanette Locke

p. 1745
Alexander Bruce

pp. 997-1036
Martha Fleming